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ABSTRACT

Attrition at the Arkansas College, a small independent institution, was studied through a survey of former students. Respondents were asked to reflect upon their college experience in relation to personal needs, academic and financial concerns, social life, services, and college life. The College Experience Survey and the Rate of Attrition Instrument, both of which were developed by the Council of Independent Colleges, were used. Full-time freshmen enrolled in the fall semesters of 1975-79 were contacted, and of 284 potential respondents, 149 responded. To encourage responses, a letter and a two-dollar bill were enclosed with the questionnaires. Some respondents noted a need for assistance in goal-setting, lack of availability of classes at particular times, disappointment with financial aid packaging, high costs, and load burdens. Complaints were made regarding the administration and athletics, and some felt that the college failed to meet expectations for a church college and cited problems of drugs, alcohol, and lack of enforced rules. Favorable comments focused on the importance of relationships with faculty advisors, mentors, and professors. Some former students expressed a need for more career-oriented programs. A sample College Experience Survey is appended. (SW)

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THE SURVEY: IMPROVING ITS USEFULNESS

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Introduction

Surveys often yield such low returns that conclusions drawn from them are tentative at best. It may be possible to increase the return rate significantly by using a personalized approach and adding a "surprise incentive." The following is a case in point.

Attrition is a vexing problem, particularly for institutions which are willing to open their doors to a "drop-out prone" clientele. Are the needs of such students being met? What can be done to improve programs and services? Arkansas College, a small independent institution, had used several approaches to analysis of the problem in the past, but never before had it surveyed its former students asking them to reflect upon their college experience.

Survey Methodology

Two data modules developed by the Council of Independent Colleges were used. The College Experience Survey was correlated with the companion module, the Rate of Attrition instrument. The mailing list for the survey was the total number (N=345) of new full-time freshmen, Fall 1975, '76, '77, '78, '79, who were not still enrolled one year later or two years later. Thirty-two names were removed from the list (suspensions, deceased, addresses foreign or unknown), leaving a total of 313 former students to whom the survey was mailed in December, 1980. Twenty-nine envelopes were returned because of incorrect addresses, giving 284 potential respondents.

To encourage response and elicit comments to open ended questions, a personalized letter was produced through the college's word processing center and a TWO-DOLLAR BILL was enclosed. The first mailing brought 116 responses, a 41 percent return rate. Postcard reminders, mailed after three weeks, brought 33 additional responses, for a total return rate of 52 percent.

Data Analysis

The survey forms were mailed to the Council of Independent Colleges to be analyzed in comparison with data from similar institutions. Meanwhile, some tentative conclusions could be reached from the comments to open ended questions. Using the Manual as guide, these were summarized to correspond with the quantified data under the following headings:

Personal, Academic, Financial, Social Life, Services,
College Life.

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Personal:

While much praise and little blame to the College is found in these comments, it is possible that assistance in "goal setting" could have motivated some of the students to stay. They speak of "needing to grow up a whole lot," "having no career in mind," needing the motivation to attend school "without feeling pressure from family members."

Academic:

Most of the problems identified as academic are inherent in the small size of the College--lack of availability of classes at particular times (to avoid schedule conflicts or needed in late afternoon or evening) and major not offered. However, some comments point to possible problems in advising: "Didn't like major I was in, but couldn't decide what else to do." Some expressed need for more "career oriented" programs.

Favorable comments focus around the importance of relationships with faculty advisors, mentors, major professors, or just an individual faculty or staff member. It therefore seems very important for every student to have somebody on the faculty or staff to whom he or she can really relate effectively.

Financial:

Financial considerations ranked third, after personal and academic, in eliciting respondent comments. High cost, job opportunity, loan burden, and disappointment with financial aid packaging are all mentioned. These comments suggest the need to keep tuition at a level students consider affordable and the need for intensive financial aid counseling.

Social Life:

Since students in college often complain about lack of things to do, it is surprising that this does not show up as a factor influencing students to leave. "Permissiveness" on campus may be a negative factor. The influence and importance of peers is the most recurring theme.

Services:

The most derogatory remarks fell under this category. Complaints were registered against administration, athletics, and financial aid.

College Life:

Although the survey is constructed from a premise that some students will drop out because the rules are too strict, the opposite seems to be true for more of these students. Failure to live up to expectations for a "church college" and problems of "drugs," "alcohol," and "lack of enforced rules" were cited. Since the College desires to build a strong residential program, this area deserves special attention.

Summary

Former students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to express their opinions. This is indicated by the percentage of persons returning

surveys, the care and completeness in filling out questionnaires, the spontaneity of comments, the tone of the writing and telephone calls, the personal notes to favorite faculty, and the fact that many persons signed or gave return addresses (despite the guarantee of anonymity).

Honesty in the responses (which can be assumed from the above factors and the general consistency of replies) can guide the College toward improvement of programs and services. Additionally, results from the survey indicate that the College is presently meeting the needs of many students--even those who may have "stopped out" or "dropped out."

There is a surprising degree of positive feeling toward the College among those who have left without graduating. One would have expected much more fault finding as a means of excusing or rationalizing failure. Instead, for the most part, there seems a real appreciation for the College even though these people felt they had to leave it.

Enough of the respondents seem to be considering re-enrolling in college at some future date to suggest that a more formal approach to recruiting former students might be productive.

Action Plans Following Survey

A common complaint among institutional researchers is that results from studies are frequently not used by administrative policy makers. The chances of action plans being developed following surveys can be improved if there is a good response rate and if comments to open ended questions support the quantified data. Verbatim statements, meaningfully clustered according to key issues, compel action.

In the case study presented, the surprising comments regarding non-enforcement of rules in the residence halls could not go unheeded. Additionally, the College is placing added emphasis upon its Freshmen Mentor Program to provide a supportive peer group and to assist entering students in setting personal, educational, and career goals. Staff has been added to give more care in financial aid packaging and counseling.



December 8, 1980

Mr. John Doe
123 Main Street
Batesville, Arkansas 72501

Dear John:

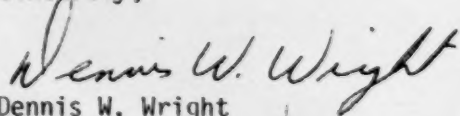
At some time in the past you chose not to return to Arkansas College to complete your degree. We would like you to reflect upon your experience while here, and your decision not to return. Will you immediately record your responses to the items and choices listed on the enclosed COLLEGE EXPERIENCE SURVEY. Your answers, together with those of other students who have not returned to Arkansas College, may be useful to us in making appropriate changes which could be helpful to currently enrolled students.

We are quite anxious to receive a maximum number of responses from this survey. Therefore, we would like to give you a TWO DOLLAR BILL and thank you for your assistance.

We have also coded the return envelope so that we can send reminders to the few who may not return the survey. Code numbers will be matched after the envelopes and surveys have been separated. Your response will remain anonymous, so please be absolutely candid.

Thank you for completing this survey and returning it to us before December 16.

Sincerely,


Dennis W. Wright
Dean of Students

DWW/af1

December 29, 1980

To Former Arkansas College Students:

Shortly before Christmas you were asked to complete a COLLEGE EXPERIENCE SURVEY. We are very pleased with the response so far, over 110 returns. However, another 50 responses will give a better representation of opinions.

If you have not yet responded, please let this card serve as a reminder that we would still appreciate hearing from you. We hope to use the results of this survey to improve our services to our students as well as help our retention rate. Thanks for your cooperation.

COLLEGE EXPERIENCE SURVEY

DIRECTIONS

This survey is an attempt to determine why students leave this college. The items below are common reasons given by students. Please indicate the degree to which each item influenced your decision by circling the appropriate number after each item. For example, if "Family problems prevented me from continuing" was a very important reason, circle number "4" after item #1. If "family problems" was only minimally important, circle number "2."

	4 = Very important	3 = Important	2 = Minimally important	1 = Not important
1. Family problems prevented me from continuing	4	3	2	1
2. Difficulty in developing proper study habits	4	3	2	1
3. College religious atmosphere is too liberal	4	3	2	1
4. Felt I was too well-known at a small college	4	3	2	1
5. Didn't maintain the GPA I thought I should have	4	3	2	1
6. Disappointed in relationships with the opposite sex	4	3	2	1
7. This college is too expensive	4	3	2	1
8. Quality of my major wasn't up to my expectation	4	3	2	1
9. Lack of communication between administration and students	4	3	2	1
10. Couldn't decide upon a major	4	3	2	1
11. Too little individual contact with faculty	4	3	2	1
12. Too few religious activities	4	3	2	1
13. Course work didn't challenge me	4	3	2	1
14. Couldn't find a group to belong to	4	3	2	1
15. Classes weren't relevant enough for me	4	3	2	1
16. Couldn't decide upon a career related to college study	4	3	2	1
17. Transferred because major wanted was not offered at this college	4	3	2	1
18. Residence hall living didn't suit me	4	3	2	1
19. Didn't receive enough financial aid to stay in college	4	3	2	1
20. Food in college cafeteria wasn't to my taste	4	3	2	1
21. Left to get a job	4	3	2	1
22. College rules too restrictive	4	3	2	1
23. Academic advising was inadequate	4	3	2	1
24. Couldn't see the value of a college education	4	3	2	1
25. College curriculum too narrow	4	3	2	1
26. Disliked snobbishness of campus social groups	4	3	2	1
27. Found better educational opportunities elsewhere	4	3	2	1
28. Left to get married	4	3	2	1
29. Disappointed with extracurricular activities	4	3	2	1
Specifically, disappointed with:				
30. Intercollegiate athletics	4	3	2	1
31. Cultural events	4	3	2	1
32. Fraternities and sororities	4	3	2	1
33. Social events	4	3	2	1
34. Intramural athletics	4	3	2	1
35. Clubs	4	3	2	1
36. This college didn't seem to fit me or to be what I wanted	4	3	2	1
37. Disappointed with quality of teaching	4	3	2	1
38. Couldn't find a job to help meet personal expenses	4	3	2	1
39. Didn't come to this college with the intention of graduating	4	3	2	1
40. Lost interest in my classes	4	3	2	1
41. College employees were rude to me	4	3	2	1
42. College located where there wasn't much to do	4	3	2	1
43. My goals, values and interests were different from those emphasized at this college	4	3	2	1
44. Courses were too difficult	4	3	2	1
45. Disappointed with student services	4	3	2	1
46. Religious atmosphere too conservative	4	3	2	1
47. Felt college in general wasn't really what I wanted	4	3	2	1
48. Studying took too much time	4	3	2	1
49. Inconsistency in rule enforcement	4	3	2	1
50. Tired of being a student	4	3	2	1

51. List considerations for leaving college other than those given:

_____	4	3	2	1
_____	4	3	2	1
_____	4	3	2	1

52. I am: male ☐ female ☐

53. I have graduated from another college ☐; completed a vocational or professional training program ☐; neither ☐

54. I am presently: enrolled full-time at another college ☐; enrolled part-time at another college ☐; not enrolled at a college ☐

55. I am not now enrolled at another college, but I plan: to enroll again at this college ☐; to enroll at another college ☐; to stay out of college ☐

56. I left college during/at the end of: ☐ Fall ☐ Semester Year: 19____
☐ Winter ☐ Quarter
☐ Interim ☐ Term
☐ Spring
☐ Summer

57. My major at the time I left this college was: _____

If you had difficulty with the meaning of any of the above items, numbers 1-50, please go back and circle the number of each of those items.

Is there anything you would like to say about leaving our college? If so, please write this below.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please return the form in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Please feel free to visit us at any time.